

Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!

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Many years ago, I was very fortunate to have a boss who took an interest in my development. I have come to appreciate his training, coaching, and discipline that modeled great management behavior. Through his mentoring, I developed the foundations of my beliefs and processes.

One day, while my mentor and I were reviewing the site I managed, we ran across an unacceptable situation. His silence was deafening. I jumped to fix the problem wanting to make it disappear in hope that his disappointment would disappear with it. As I scrambled, my mentor said, "Richard, don't just do something. Stand there." I moved even faster. He repeated, "Richard, don't just do something. Stand there." I was moving as fast as I could at this point. I felt his hand on my shoulder and I stopped. "Listen to what I am saying", he said, "don't just do something. Stand there."

As you read this, you've no doubt spotted the misplaced words in this everyday catch phrase. No, it is not written incorrectly. Think about what the phrase says for a moment. It took me a few minutes that day to hear, but years to understand his words: "Don't just do something, stand there."

Management must have the ability to step back from the current situation and plan based on extrapolation. The problem, in this case, was caused by my lack of planning. I was trying to fix problems. I was reacting. I was not anticipating problems through extrapolation. My mentor explained that too often he saw managers of all ages and experience levels work to fix a problem rather than use the time wisely planning to avoid problems before they occur. He asserted that a manager must set aside time to think and plan. He likened the process to a road trip. Without a plan, turns are missed, lodging is unavailable, and in general, the quality of the journey is decreased.

In one sentence, my mentor defined for me a philosophy that has become the single most powerful tool in my management arsenal. Until that day, I had lived by the saying, "Don't just stand there. Do something." In my mind, motion was equal to management. I learned over time, though it was very difficult for an action at all costs

guy like me, to “not just do something- stand there.” I have been planning and executing successfully ever since.

In management, what is the most important job? Hiring? Training? Problem solving? Administration? While all are important, the most important job is planning. There is an old saying that takes many forms, but communicates the same idea. “Those who fail to plan, plan to fail.” Proactive anticipation of opportunities is critical when you want to take your management effectiveness to the next level.

American culture is focused on the immediate. Instant gratification and wealth are valued. Our culture applies pressure to forego planning and skip straight to execution. In other words, don’t just stand there, do something! The immediate overshadows the important. This is a reactive approach to opportunities rather than a proactive approach. The history of American business is filled with examples of companies that let the immediate overshadow the important. The companies involved became severely distressed or failed altogether. K-mart failed to proactively recognize the threat of Wal-Mart’s growth. General Motors has failed for years to recognize the changing tastes in the car market. This certainly isn’t their only problem, but great sales growth forgives many sins. Burlington Industries failed to anticipate the mounting threat of imports and the effect of its aging equipment. Planning is the cornerstone in a proactive approach to addressing the opportunities and threats in the business environment.

Planning demands four things: time, information, vision, and a logical framework. Without all of these ingredients, planning is worthless. The first ingredient is time. Time must be allotted for planning. Similar to what my mentor said, you can’t always be in motion. Time must be scheduled in the same way that paperwork, meetings, and lunch are scheduled. In my experience, planning time has to be uninterrupted and held in a place with minimal distractions. Depending on the business, planning may be done once a month or once a week. Experience will dictate how often to plan. Planning time with multiple interruptions and many distractions is called “business as usual.” Don’t allow the immediate to overshadow the important. First, schedule time to plan.

Information is the next key ingredient. Planning without some kind of information is called dreaming. Planning should begin as soon as information is known. Incomplete information serves as a starting point for the planning process. Minimal information gives

the planner a place to start. Too often, management delays until complete or nearly complete information is known. Having complete certainty of information about the future is makes it the present or, worse yet, the past. Start with the information you have.

Vision is the third ingredient. Experience in your business segment gives you a unique position. Experience allows you to amplify small amounts of information to see the future more clearly. Recall the old television VHF/UHF antennas. Many of us grew up with these “rabbit ears” sitting atop our television sets. Many people in a business segment have access to the information being broadcast by the market. Your experience in the business segment acts as an amplifier to take this information and boost its clarity through extrapolation. Greater experience gives greater amplification. Vision, as I use it here, is the ability to anticipate future opportunities and threats to the business. Vision is not just the job of the CEO or the Vice President. Vision is necessary at all levels of management in the organization. Higher levels of management should engage the knowledge of lower levels for help in the vision. Each level adds to the amplification. Clarity improves with each signal boost.

Just as there is a framework for problem solving, there is a framework for planning. The problem-solving framework involves seven steps: defining the problem; analyzing the problem; generating possible solutions; analyzing the solutions; selecting the best solution; implementing the solution; following up to ensure the problem is solved. Whether you write out the process step by step or use it tacitly, each step is critical.

Problem solving is critical in business, but is, by nature, reactive. The problem is visible and reaction is necessary to resolve the problem. The only proactive part in the problem-solving process is preventing recurrence of an existing problem. Managers who operate with higher intensity recognize the potential in existing information and work to create the outcome desired rather than waiting for problems to develop. To put this in perspective, picture a single unlit wooden match sitting next to a fuse. Following this fuse, you see it disappear into a building marked “Danger: Explosives.” The reactive manager allows the match to remain in place until the match is lit. Ignition of the match precipitates action. The proactive manager recognizes the potential of the match. He extrapolates the potential of ignition, the fuse starting to burn unnoticed, and finally

sparks reaching the building. Managers are not clairvoyant. Successful managers shift the mode of thought from reactive to proactive. The proactive manager removes the point of ignition for problems. Planning, and not just execution, is the method that changes a reactive manager into a proactive manager.

Before moving to the planning framework, two questions have to be answered. First, what is my planning period? There are three planning periods: immediate, short term, and long term. Immediate planning deals with events focused on the next thirty days. Short-term planning concerns events focused within the next twelve to eighteen months, but excludes the events addressed in immediate planning. Long-term planning is focused on events beyond the outer limit of short-term planning. In this framework, only one planning period will be used at a time. Mixing planning periods invites confusion. A separate planning session should be used for each unique planning period.

What information am I acting on in the framework? Focus on a limited amount of information. Intermixing information invites confusion. Let's go back to the amplified antenna signal. When cross signals get amplified, a confused picture emerges.

Similar to the problem-solving framework, there are seven steps in my planning framework. Define the information focal point, organize and analyze the information, extrapolate the potential effect of the information on your business situation, select the effect most desired that is achievable, list the actions necessary to achieve the desired effect, plan an implementation timeline of the actions, follow up to ensure the desired effect is achieved. This planning framework is an iterative process. Steps one through three may be completed several times before steps four through seven are needed. Before continuing, it is important to note that the framework is flexible and should be molded to your unique situation. Just like the framework used in sculpting, the planning framework gives general support and shape to your planning, but it is up to you the shape that the final product will take.

In a quiet place with an uninterrupted portion of time ahead, define the planning period and the information being acted on. Now, define the information focal point. What parts of the business will this impact? Where does the information lead you to focus? Impact may be in more than one area. You should note all areas of impact and use the information in future sessions for the different planning period. As a rule of thumb, I

always address the most immediate planning period affected first. Areas that the information may affect include, but are not limited to, cash flow, sales, operations, shipping, human resources, training, etc.

The next step is to organize and analyze the information. Organization may be as simple as writing the information on a sheet of paper or it may involve charts and graphs. Organize the information with regards to the planning period and area of impact in the business. Analysis of the information can be both qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative analysis is based on your intuition (SWOT analysis), other expert's opinions, stakeholders' analysis, and past similar experiences. The more immediate the planning period, the less qualitative factors usually impact analysis.

Quantitative analysis is based on the numbers. Equations, management science, and statistics play larger roles in planning periods closer to the present time. Break-Even Analysis, Market Research, Sales Forecasting, Critical Path Analysis, and Decision Trees are all good examples of quantitative analysis tools.

When analysis is complete, extrapolate the potential effects of the information on your current situation. Extrapolation is an exercise in logic. Given the results of the analysis of the information currently possessed, what are the possible outcomes? This is a creative process and requires whole-brain thinking. Write out all of the potential effects of the information and document the pro's and con's of each effect. Extrapolation is controlled brainstorming. Brainstorming is possibilities without limits. Extrapolation is possibilities within the confines of the planning period and the current business situation.

Now, select from the most desirable effect that is achievable within your business situation from the list. You may find that the choice most desirable is not the choice with the most pro's or the least con's. Take care that the selected option is achievable. Investing one billion dollars in R&D is not a good selection if you are running a one million dollar pharmaceutical lab.

Once the selection has been made, make a list of the actions that will be necessary to achieve the result. List the resources needed to support each action. People you can delegate steps of the process too should be listed in the resources. Resources not yet available need to be listed and, in a separate planning session, plans made to marshal

these resources. If a selection is desirable for the business, it is worth the investment of resources. A desired effect without planned assigned resources is known as a pipedream.

As soon as the actions for implementation are known, formulate a timeline. Goals need deadlines. Everyone is busy. A goal without a deadline will not receive attention. Each step should have a deadline within the overall project deadline. The timeline can be drawn in the form of a flowchart or a Gantt chart. It can simply take the form of a line graph. The timeline needs time periods allotted to achieve each step. Actions that depend on the completion of a prior action should show that relationship in some way. I used a flowchart that flowed down and branched out to show such relationships. I wrote the name of the action and the days assigned inside each box. Relationships showed the effect delay in one area would have on the whole plan.

Follow up is critical. The process is iterative. It is a journey. A plan being implemented is malleable. The fewer resources committed to the plan the greater its flexibility. Following up and measuring the success of the plan either affirms the plan, suggests changes to the plan, or negates the plan. Changes to the plan will be the most common result of follow up. Follow up communicates commitment. You can't expect people to be committed if you aren't.

Follow up (scheduled in the timeline) includes weekly management team meetings to discuss personnel reaction to reviews, conversations with employees about recruiter contacts, planning of other activities, and gauge the progress on each step as the deadlines approach. Follow up also includes conversations with employees one on one about how to improve the team and other concerns. Connection is the key. Keeping checks on the dates of grand opening, re-estimating sales, and personnel needs fall under follow up and are part of the iterative process.

Finally, not all steps of the model have to be completed during one planning session. As stated earlier, at times the information available only allows a few steps of the model to be completed. Further information is needed to complete all steps. This is all right. Use the framework to benefit you in your business segment. The frequency and length of the planning sessions can be altered as information increases and decreases. Frequency may go up to once per day as an anticipated event draws closer or may drop to once per month during slow or holiday seasons. The length shouldn't exceed one hour.

After one hour, thought processes can become dull. If sessions have to last beyond one hour, take ten or fifteen minutes break each hour.

Remember, the reason for planning is to get a proactive view of the business and events impacting the business. Planning is a mental exercise. Fresh, new thoughts should be explored during planning time. Try to think beyond the boundaries of your current business efforts. Be creative. You are the only person present during these sessions. Don't be afraid. The worst that will happen is you end up with great ideas that can't be implemented today. Sculpt the business into the image you envision. Use this framework to stop and plan. Don't just do something, stand there... and plan.

About the Author

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